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American History 300

11/9/17

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### The Sedition Act

The Sedition Act written by John Adams was about how it prohibited the citizens or aliens from conspiring against the operation of federal laws; from preventing government officials from executing their duties; and from aiding and insurrection, riot, or unlawful assembly. It outlawed the publication of any "false, scandalous and malicious writings" against the government and any effort to incite opposition to the government. This clearly violated individual protections of the people under the first amendment of the Constitution; however, the practice of "Judicial Review," whereby the Supreme Court considers the constitutionality of laws was not yet well developed. Furthermore, the justices were all strong Federalists. As a result, Madison and Jefferson directed their opposition to the new laws to state legislatures. The Virginia and Kentucky legislatures passed resolutions declaring the federal laws invalid within their states. The most dramatic victim of the law was representative Matthew Lyon of Vermont. His letter that criticized President Adams' "unbounded thirst for ridiculous pomp, foolish adulation, and self avarice" caused him to be imprisoned. While Federalists sent Lyon to prison for his opinions, his constituents re-elected him to Congress even from his jail cell.

"That if any person shall write, print, utter or publish, or shall cause or procure to be written, printing, uttered or published, or shall knowingly and willingly assist or aid in writing, printing, uttering or publishing any false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the

United States...shall be punished by a fine not exceeding two thousand dollars, and by imprisonment not exceeding two years” (Adams, Alien and Sedition Act of 1798).

Uncommon word: Procure - to bring about.

In the Alien and Sedition Act that John Adams wrote in 1798, the whole point of the Act was to seize any misinformation about the government, and charge the people involved with the slandering of the government with jail sentences and money debts. If a person had any involvement with the crime, by simply helping out the person that committed the crime with any part of their plan and or slandering material, they would also too be sentenced to the same punishment that the original criminal has gotten. I chose this portion of the primary document because it covered the key central points of the act and how it was supposed to work. From this part of the document, people can express whatever opinion they have of the Sedition Act without any influences from the rest of the act. They can also clearly see the holes in the act and what the government was trying to do with this act.

Question 1: Who wrote the Sedition Act?

- A) Thomas Jefferson
- B) Benjamin Franklin
- C) John Adams
- D) Woodrow Wilson

Question 2: How did the majority of the American population feel about this act.

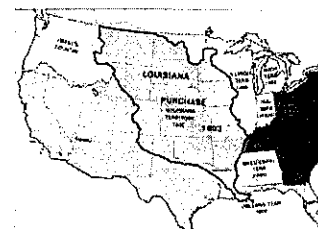
- A) The people felt like the act was too light and petitioned to get it revised.
- B) The people felt like the act was impossible to enforce in the constitution.
- C) The people did speak up but failed to express their feelings towards it.
- D) The people did speak up about the contradictions in this act with the foundation of the government.

“The Alien and Sedition Acts.” *Ushistory.org*, Independence Hall Association,

[www.ushistory.org/us/19e.asp](http://www.ushistory.org/us/19e.asp).

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Pd. 6  
November 14, 2017



### Louisiana Purchase

#### **Background:**

1. The French sold land to the Americans for 15 million dollars to aid them in a war.
2. Thomas Jefferson was the president at the time
  - He thought it was best to limit power but put aside his opinions to expand the colonies westward.
3. This was controversial because the states did not have the money to keep land going.
  - Jefferson would be going against his power-limitations
  - There was also a fear of America's new neighbors such as more Spaniards and trade with them (History).

#### **Vocab:**

- |                                   |   |                       |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|
| * <b>Occasion:</b>                | reason or purpose                         | * <b>Acquisition:</b> | Investment  |
| * <b>Confederacy:</b>             | alliance                                  | * <b>Indemnity:</b>   | Security or protection against a loss or other financial burden |
| * <b>Induce:</b>                  | influence (successful)                    |                       |   |
| * <b>Convulsion:</b>              | violent uprising                          |                       |   |
| * <b>Procure:</b>                 | persuade or cause someone to do something |                       |   |
| * <b>Metaphysical Subtleties:</b> | Nothing of importance                     |                       |   |

#### **Underlying events:**

1. After the Louisiana Purchase the states had a goal to get Florida from Spain.
  - a. They planned to negotiate with the country and avoid war at all cost
  - b. negotiation with Spain would consider a trade of the Louisiana territory or parts of it for the Floridas (Library of Congress).

#### **Issue:**

1. Thomas Jefferson sent a letter to John Breckinridge concerning the attempt to obtain the Floridas - he did not want to have to give up any of the territory
  - a. Louisiana Territory brought them power and stability
  - b. The country could expand
2. Another issue included buying the land without much talk of it in congress
  - a. Jefferson adopted the loose concern of the constitution when he decided to buy it
3. He was in strong favor of the Louisiana Territory and wanted to make it official that land bought cannot be taken (Jefferson).

#### **Who:**

1. Thomas Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican President, wrote a letter to John Breckinridge, a federalist, in 1803. Breckinridge was a U.S. senator and also tried to influence other Senators. Later got promoted to U.S. Attorney General. John Breckinridge supported the Louisiana Purchase.

#### **The reading:**

1. The tone of this reading is very straightforward and direct. Jefferson states "The executive in seizing the fugitive occurrence which so much advances the good of their country, have done an act beyond the Constitution." Thomas Jefferson went behind the government's back because the Federalists argued that it was unconstitutional to acquire the Louisiana territory. Although the federalists thought that the purchase of the territory was unconstitutional, the benefit the United States gained from this purchase was very significant.

**Quote:**

*"...propositions are made to exchange Louisiana, or part of it, for the Floridas. But, as I have said, we shall get the Floridas without, and I would not give one inch of the waters of the Mississippi to any nation, because I see in light very important to our peace the exclusive right to its navigation, and the admission of no nation into it, but as into the Potomac or Delaware, with our consent and under our police. These federalists see in the acquisition the formation of a new confederacy; embracing all the waters on the Mississippi, on both sides of it, and a separation of its eastern waters from it, and the separation of its eastern waters from it" (Jefferson).*

- There was a plan to exchange parts of Louisiana for the Floridas
  - a. no trade of Louisiana territory at all
  - b. the states will only negotiate with Spain for the Floridas
- He says it is important that they preserve everyone's right to explore more of the country
- Federalists want to build the country but they see neither the importance of this new territory nor separation the states have from the other side of the country.
- ★ This section is most important because it briefly explains the main purpose of this letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Breckinridge. It also tells what Thomas Jefferson admits the federalists are lacking when thinking about the greater good for the country.

**Multiple Choice Questions:**

- 1) Who initially owned the Louisiana territory?
  - A. The Americans
  - B. The French
  - C. The Spanish
  - D. The British
- 2) Why was the Louisiana Purchase controversial?
  - A. The Spaniards threatened war on the French if they sold it to the Americans
  - B. Jefferson would go against his idea of limiting power
  - C. The states did not have the money to support this even though it was a low price
  - D. B and C
  - E. A, B, and C

**Works Consulted**

"Louisiana Purchase." *History*, A+E Networks, 2009, [www.history.com/topics/](http://www.history.com/topics/louisiana-purchase)

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